

“Wayne’s an actual village?” I ask, looking over the field of wheat and other grains at the distant dot.

“It comes up as one, if you query the system,” Brandon replies.
Which I do.

System Query: Wayne
Farming village, unaffiliated with any city. Known for growing a variety of grains for export.

It’s possible to get more information, with the right questions, but since it comes up, that means it is a settlement according to the system. If I query about Toledo.

System Query: Toledo
There is no information regarding Toledo.

That doesn’t mean there is absolutely nothing about the word Toledo, or even places that might be called that. But the system has some smarts to it. In the wild, compared to, let’s say, a library, it’s going to automatically narrow the result on context, starting with where I’m located, and what I asked about recently. A library is about accessing information, so it’s why it dumped everything on me when I asked about nox, not just settlements or ruins by that name.

It has some smarts, but it’s not all that smart about how it uses them.

“How do they extend the civilized zone, then? I’m not seeing any watch towers.”

“Watch towers extend civilization?” Silver asks. “I thought they were to see approaching monsters and enemies.”

“You’re thinking of guard towers,” Brandon says. “Watch towers are settlement extensions. I don’t know how Wayne deals with it. I haven’t gone into the village itself. Just the caravan stop.” He points to the distant building along the road we’re on. The path leading to the village itself is behind us at this point.

As more of it comes into view, the first thing that registers is how deserted it is. There is nothing on the flat ground around the building, or by the warehouses closer to the field. It’s not until I can make out the porch that I notice the three horses tied to the rail.

Inside is no better. The minotaur that was traveling ahead of us is morosely eating a bowl of something. Three non-humans are together at a table. The owners of the horses, I’m guessing. There’s a wolf, an insect looking one, and one with bark for skin. I’d have to query the system to find out what they are, and I don’t particularly care at the moment.

“Welcome to the Wayne Village Stop,” the worn-looking man behind the bar greets us.

“What’s available?” I ask, stepping up to the bar. I am done eating jerky and meat stew.

He gestures, and the selection appears before me.

Porridge, \$1 Beer, \$1 Water, Free

“That’s it?” I might be tired of stew, but for porridge to be that cheap, there can’t be much more than water and grain in the thing. I’ve had it when I was seven. I’d rather not have it again.

“We haven’t had a caravan since the harvest, and the hunters all fallen sick a few weeks ago and aren’t up to hunting yet.”

I buy a porridge and beer for each of us, more to help him out than because I want that, and we sit. Brandon is the only one eating like it’s actually good. The beer, at least, has flavor.

“Are we spending the night?” Helen asks. The hope in her voice is poorly masked.

“We should keep going,” Brandon replies. “There’s plenty of daylight left.”

She looks at me, and this time, she doesn’t mask the hope in her eyes. Brandon right, the best thing to do is press on. We aren’t rushing, but it isn’t like there’s anything to be gained here.

I look over my shoulder at the barkeep. At least not for us. “Give me a minute.” I can feel Brandon’s reproach as I step to the bar. “What would you give me for Jerky?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. A dollar per treen? It’s going to be nice to have variety, but it’s not like I can do all that much with that, or like I’m going to need that by the time harvest comes around.”

“How about fresh meat? A place like this has ways to preserve that, right?”

“How fresh are you talking about? How much do you have?”

I smile. “Fresh like killed once I go out to hunt it.”

He whistles.

“Dennis,” Brandon calls from the table. “Whatever you’re planning, stop it.”

Too bad for him, I’m the leader of this team.

“If you bring me a deer, I’ll definitely put the four of you up for the night. And I’ll make you a meal for dinner and breakfast.”

“Roasted steak, no stew. I am so tired of stew.”

He chuckles. “I can do steak. I even have root vegetables to go with that.”

“You want just the meat, or the entire deer?”

“I’d rather the whole thing. I can butcher it myself. If there’s parts you want for yourself, tell me and we can arrange something.”

I shake my head. It’s more about transporting it. I can’t throw the carcass in my inventory. Rules are, I have to be able to lift something with one hand off the ground for it to fit.

“If I bring you two, can we get a bath each with our room?”

“If you don’t mind filling them yourselves.”

“It’s a deal.” I offer him my hand.

You have been offered a quest: Meat for a bed and bath
Bring back two deer carcasses to the Wayne Village Stop
Quest Generated by Patrick Keegan
Rewards: Rooms for you and for everyone on your team, dinner meal and breakfast for you and everyone on your team. A bath for you and everyone on your team. Consequence of refusal or failure: None
Do you Accept the quest? Yes/No?

I raise an eyebrow.

“This makes it official, so neither of us can complain we’re trying to screw the other over.”

I shrug and accept the quest.

“Damn it, Dennis!”

Right, I have to set things if I don’t want the quest I accept to be team quests.

Brandon’s glaring when I return. Helen looks relieved and Silver amused.

“We’re spending the night,” I announce.

“I’m not helping you,” Brandon replies.

“I’m not asking anyone to help. I’m the one who wants to do this. Next time, I’ll make sure the quest’s private.”

Brandon sighs. “I’d rather you don’t. At least this way I get to see how much of an idiot you’re being.”

“He can use the meat. We can use the rest, a good meal, or two, and a bath. I’m not as desperate for one as Helen, but I will make all I can of the hot water.”

“Me too,” Silver says.

Brandon grumbles. “Did you at least arrange for individual rooms? With the place empty, I don’t see a point in having to share one.”

“You really think you’re going to find someone here to share your bed?” Helen asks incredulously.

“It’s like you don’t even know me, Hel.”

A return to the bar confirms that yes, we’ll get individual rooms. And he’s even willing to let us have them now, which Brandon agrees to immediately before going to the table with the three non-humans. Within seconds, he’s at the bar with the tree person for his room and they disappear up the stairs. The others at the table don’t seem bothered.

“I think he’d find a way to sleep with someone in an empty city,” Silver says with a chuckle.

“You two take it easy.” I stand.

“Thank you for this, Dennis.”

I shrug. “I need the training. He needs the meat, you need a bath, Brandon needed to get laid. We all win.”

“I’d win more with an audience,” Silver said, then grins. “But I won’t complain about the bath.”

“I’ll definitely be back before dinner.”

“Mister McLeod,” the barkeep calls, and for a second I wonder how he knows my name. From the quest. It was attached to it when I accepted it. “Be careful not to wander too far from the road. The wilderness levels spike quickly this far from the village.”

“Thanks.” Not as useful as he probably thinks it is, since I don’t have away to know where the spike will start, but it’s good to be warned.

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I hate this deer. Or deer like animal. I just put a sixth arrow in it, and yet, it runs off again. The previous one wasn’t that tough. At least it’s losing enough blood tracking it is easier. I move slowly once I spot it again, doing my best not to make sounds, and to keep track of the breeze as I look for a good line of sight. When I have it, it’s sideways to me, which means a lot of body to hit, but at this point, I can’t tell if it’s having much of an effect. I’m guessing this is where zoology would come in handy. I’d know where the heart is in there.

Still, I can see the lungs move and that’s probably a good place to aim for again, even if the heart’s not behind that. I breathe in as I pull the arrow back, take my time lining up the shot, and let it fly.

The deer screams as it impacts its chests, then runs off, again.

I hung my head. If I hadn’t promised him two of them, I might give this up. The snap of a twig behind me makes me spin, raising the bow, an arrow already nocked in place. I didn’t even think about grabbing it.

“Sorry, sorry.” The minotaur’s hands are up. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I saw you leaving, and I thought we could hunt together.”

My bow’s partially down when the incongruity of what she said registers. She stops mid-step in my direction as I aim at her again.

“I’m been tracking this thing for at least half an hour. And you just now decided to make an approach?”

“I just now caught you when you aren’t running off, or aiming for it, and then running off. I didn’t want to mess up your shot.”

I’m tempted to lower my bow. I have been pretty focus on hunting that deer. “I’d rather you head back to the stop, or pick another place to hunt. It’s nothing against you, but I’ve had too many bad experiences recently with people acting friendly and claiming they wanted to help me.”

“Okay, I get it. Sorry to have bothered you.” She turns and stops. “I did want to say it’s nice that you’re doing this for the inn guy.”

I nod. I doubt she did it on purpose, but moving like that gives me a nice view of her curves, and they are really nice. “I try to help where I can.” I wonder how nice they’d look without all that fabric over them.

Something flashes in the team chat, but I ignore it. She’s much more interesting to look at.

“You like to help?” her voice is smooth, luxurious, so different from just seconds ago. “I could use your help with something.” I smile as those curves approach. She smells good. She smells hot, like what I’ve imagined sex smells like. What I imagine it’s going to be with her. “Do you want to help me?” she whispers in my ear.

The things I want to help her do to me, to do to her. I take hold of her hip and pull her to me, ready to kiss her and—

Pain erupts in my side, and a quarter of my health is gone.

I shove her away, cursing as I equip my sword and shield. I'm going to berate myself later for letting whatever that was happen, although the vanishing debuff almost certainly had something to do about it, as well as where half my willpower has vanished too.

"If I'd known you were this tough, I'd have used poison."

Even without Taking it on the Nose, this wouldn't have killed me. "Let me guess, the reward?"

"Among other things. The experience is what I'm really after."

I have no idea what that means, and I'm not interested in conversation. My attack surprises her, but she has a sword and parries. The shield bash in her face she doesn't avoid, but she isn't slowed, and I'm parrying and blocking as I back, barely managing not to stumble over roots and rocks. When she slows, I go on the offensive and one thing's clear. I have more stamina than she does.

She's already panting, and it's doing something rather nice to the way her chest moves. I lick my lips, wondering what her breasts—

Fuck that. I glare at her, a quarter of my willpower vanishing as does the forming debuff. A charm of some sort. Probably not magic, because I don't know if those can be willed away.

The pommel of my sword impacts her face before she's over the surprise of me breaking out of it. Then it's my shield in her face again and she stumbles back. I kick her in the stomach and she falls back. That cost me a few hit points from the knife in my side and a whole lot of pain, but that, I can ignore, as I can the flashing of the team chat. Brandon's probably screaming at me in there right now.

I kick her again as she tries to get up. "I am so fucking fed up with you people trying to kill me." I kick her again. "I didn't ask for any of this, okay?" again. "It's not my fault if Xander's an arrogant asshole who fucking made sure I wouldn't want to be fucking nice to him." I kick again, and she stops moving. "If he'd fucking asked nicely, I'd have showed him the journal, and he'd have seen I can't access it either!" I kick her again to make sure she's unconscious. And once more because I'm pissed.

Once I've caught my breath, I bring up the team chat, and it's Helen and Silver who've been messaging me, starting with when the charm must have hit and one of them noticed the drop in my willpower.

Dennis: I'm fine. The minotaur was after the journal. I dealt with her.

Helen: Did you kill her?

Dennis: it's tempting, at this point, but no. She's still alive.

Helen: Good. Don't kill her.

Dennis: I don't think I'd get in trouble with anyone, Helen. I doubt anyone would even notice.

Helen: Do not kill her, Dennis. Trust me on that. Even Brandon will tell you the same thing.

I find that one doubtful, but...

Dennis: fine. I'm not a murderer, anyway.

Helen: Patch yourself up and come back. Bring her with you.

Dennis: I still owe Patrick a deer, and she can get herself back when she wakes up. I don't give a fuck if the wildlife gets her at this point.

Helen: I'm sure he'll understand.

Dennis: Helen, I don't screw people if I can help it. And this, I can help. I'll be back in a bit with the deer.

I close the chat and pull the knife out. At least first aid is something I can use on myself when I can reach the wound. Can't do anything about yet another hole in an armor, though. Patched and no longer bleeding, I pick up the deer's trail.

I don't look forward to shooting my bow hurt like I am, but I am going to get that deer and complete this quest.

And, it turns out; I don't have to shoot my bow. When I find the deer, it's already dead, bled out, I'm guessing, since there aren't any animal marks on it.

Getting it over my shoulders is an adventure that nearly has me drop unconscious from how hard I pull at my injured side once, but I manage it, then head back to the stop.